

SOUTH PEQUOP WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 41,090 acres

The South Pequop WSA (NV-010-035), located approximately 45 miles southeast of Elko, Nevada, is an U-shaped northeast-southwest trending ridge in the southern Pequop Mountains. Dirt roads form most of the WSA boundary. There are two short sections of "point-to-point" boundary along the southwestern and northeastern edges. Several miles of section line comprise the boundary along the northeast border. There are no split estate lands or private inholdings.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE-

34,544 acres recommended for wilderness

6,546 acres recommended for nonwilderness

The recommendation is to designate 34,544 acres as wilderness because of naturalness and outstanding opportunities for solitude and for primitive and unconfined recreation. The densely-forested, highly-dissected portions of the WSA provide a setting untouched by man. The remaining 6,546 acres would be released for uses other than wilderness.

Opportunities for solitude are outstanding in the many drainages radiating from the central ridgeline. The dissected topography and dense conifer stands offer visitors a sense of remoteness and total isolation. Outstanding and challenging opportunities for hiking and backpacking are available along the ridges and canyons. Scenic vistas are outstanding at the higher elevations; views of up to 70 miles are available in some directions.

Conflicts with other resources are limited. Within the area recommended for wilderness the USGS identified 6,100 acres of moderate potential for metallic minerals. The wilderness values of the two zones are considered higher than potential mineral values. Even without wilderness designation, development is not anticipated. The area recommended for wilderness also contains identified phosphate resources and areas with moderate potential for phosphate resources. These deposits and potential deposits are not large enough to be economically mined.

Two parcels comprise the 6,546 acres not recommended for wilderness. The northern parcel parallels the Western Pacific railroad line. The low, rolling hills do not adequately screen out the sights and sounds of the railroad. The area also has moderate potential for metallic minerals. Wilderness values are not outstanding until the ridgeline that forms the northern boundary of the area recommended for wilderness.

A second parcel along the eastern boundary lacks opportunities for solitude and for primitive and unconfined recreation. The gentle terrain contains most of the WSA's vehicle ways, is easily accessible by ORVs, and lends itself to vegetative manipulation. Future private land activities at the north end could adversely affect wilderness values. Also, a large portion of the area has a good potential for phosphates. These factors, and the lack of outstanding wilderness values, were considered more important than preserving the parcel as wilderness.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The WSA is predominately natural with densely-forested, highly-dissected terrain essentially untouched by man. Vegetation ranges from sagebrush and grasses on the south-facing slopes to dense stands of white fir and limber pine on the northern exposures. Pinyon-juniper woodlands occupy much of the mountain range, while nearly impenetrable shrub thickets cover many slopes. This area's 11 miles of vehicle ways are generally unnoticeable and do not affect naturalness.

B. Solitude: Within the area recommended for wilderness there are outstanding opportunities for solitude. There are many steep canyons extending both east and west from the knife-edged ridgeline. Dense vegetation in these canyons provides outstanding seclusion. Although the southern exposures are not densely vegetated, the WSA has overall outstanding opportunities for solitude. Elevations range from 5,650 to 8,950 feet.

Military aircraft sometimes disrupt the solitude. A Military Training Route, used for low-level, high-speed exercises, covers

almost all the WSA. Flight elevations vary, but aircraft fly as low as 100 feet above ground level. Disruption of the silence, which contributes to the feeling of solitude, is still infrequent. At times, aircraft can be seen and/or heard all day. Other times, one can travel for days and not see or hear a military jet.

Within the area not recommended for wilderness opportunities for solitude are low to nonexistent because of gentle terrain and no dense woodlands.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: The area recommended for wilderness contains outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. Opportunities for hiking, backpacking, and camping are available along the ridgelines and in the canyons. Long-distance scenic vistas in some directions are available from the ridgeline. The WSA provides outstanding opportunities for fossil collecting or viewing bristlecone pine trees.

There are no opportunities for outstanding primitive and unconfined recreation in the areas recommended for nonwilderness. The gentle topography offers few hiking or backpacking challenges.

D. Special Features: Bristlecone pine trees, some of the oldest living things known, occur at the higher elevations.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The entire WSA can be managed as wilderness to preserve the values now present. There are no private inholdings, state lands, or rights-of-way. The WSA has low potential for energy resources. Although the WSA contains zones of moderate potential for metallic minerals, development is not anticipated. The potential phosphate resources are not considered of high enough grade to be developed. As of January 1990, there were four mining claims in the WSA.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

According to a USGS report, two areas have moderate potential for metallic minerals. A 500-acre area is at the northern end of the study area, while the other 5,600-acre area is north of Ninemile Canyon. The report also identified areas of moderate potential for phosphate resources and a small area of identified (actual) phosphate resources. Oil and gas potential is low. As of January 1990, there were four post-FLPMA mining claims in the WSA.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS

The BLM received 42 comments on the draft EIS; four supported more wilderness than proposed, seven supported the proposed action, 25 supported less wilderness than proposed, and six had no position. Comments specific to the South Pequop WSA touched on the high wilderness and scenic values and the potential enhancement from bighorn sheep reintroduction. Comments opposing wilderness centered on the potential for increased visitor use to adversely affect the area.

County agencies or officials submitted no comments. The Governor of Nevada's consistency review supported the BLM's original preferred alternative but suggested developing more an identifiable eastern boundary.

The EPA requested clarification in the final EIS on interim management, off-road vehicle use affecting potential wilderness status, access for mineral exploration or development, and the use of USGS/BOM surveys to modify wilderness recommendation. The U.S. Air Force supported alternatives that would not restrict military overflights.

The BLM received one comment on the final Wells Wilderness EIS; the EPA supported the proposed action.